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An Uneasy Commemoration: 
1957, the British in India and the ‘Sepoy Mutiny’

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The 150th anniversary of the Indian Uprising of 1857 has inspired a flurry of new books and commemorative events. A far greater significance, however, was accorded to the 100th anniversary in 1957. Coming, as it did, so soon after independence, feelings ran high. In India, the anniversary was another opportunity to celebrate the achievement of independence and the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting published the first official and explicitly nationalist interpretation of events, Surendranath Sen's *Eighteen fifty-seven*. For British diplomatic representatives in India, by contrast, the anniversary was a cause of considerable anxiety. Their concerns were manifold: the welfare of the still-substantial British community in the country, the preservation of British memorials, and the likely impact of the commemoration on modern Indian attitudes to British governance, and international politics more generally. Above all, there was a concern that the British diplomatic 'coup' achieved in 1947 should not be undone by any over-emphasis of earlier armed conflicts between Britain and India and the arousal of militant anti-imperialist and anti-British feeling. In the months leading up to the anniversary, Foreign and Commonwealth Relations office correspondence reveals a determined effort to ‘manage’ sub-continental politicians and the reporting of the anniversary celebrations and to sustain a preferred British official interpretation of historical events. This paper draws upon a file of recently released correspondence in the National Archives Kew to provide an insight into the working of diplomatic relations between London and newly independent nations of the Indian subcontinent, as well as the role played by British officialdom in the fashioning of contemporary understandings of the Freedom Struggle in India.¹

1. British citizens and statues & Indian Mutiny Memorial

As early as mid 1956, the British High Commissioner in Delhi was sounding out Dr Katju, the Indian Defence Minister, as to the likely content and tenor of the forthcoming commemoration, and possible implications for British residents in the country. Specifically he had been contacted by British nationals living in Kanpur, who were
worried about being invited to events which they would not wish to
to attend. By October 1956, the High Commission [HC] office in Delhi
was reporting: ‘Our advice to UK citizens, especially to those in the
main centres like Lucknow, Meerut and Delhi will probably be to
make themselves as scarce as possible on the particular days of the
celebrations.’ The High Commission was also well aware of ‘the
possibility that the occasion may lead to demonstrations directed
particularly against UK persons or monuments’. They planned to
assess the likelihood of this nearer the time.

From India itself, W H Christie, of the UK Citizens Association
explained the regional differences in attitudes to the centenary:
in Lucknow we could happily celebrate a glorious feat of British arms, and
elsewhere the 200th anniversary of the battle of Plassey! In Cawnpore we are
all so backward, and most of what happened was so bloody that it would not
be difficult for anyone to put a foot wrong and commit unintentional betises
[Fr. insults], if care and forethought is not taken. There is a silly proposal to
set up a statue of Tantia Topee on top of the wall. The Angel on the wall was
damaged by hooligans in 1947, and was sensibly removed to more secure
premises; but without being particularly stuffy about such things, no one can
feel happy about a statue to the Nana Sahib’s Chief Military Adviser on that
particular spot. On the whole I think everyone will be careful to avoid offence
and discourtesy. The wall and the angel referred to were of course, references to the
British memorial at the Kanpur well site. As Lahiri notes ‘on the day
India became independent [15 August 1947], a large mob invaded this
complex, blackened the face of the angel, broke its hands, and
desecrated some of the graves.’ Some time after this incident, the
angel was removed to All Souls Memorial Church, and the site of the
memorial itself was levelled to prevent further desecration.

Early in 1957 the UK High Commissioner was reportedly
reassured by the Vice President Radhakrishnan that he and the
Committee established to organise celebrations were opposed to the
suggestion that a national building be raised to commemorate the
Mutiny. His own proposal was that ‘a simple memorial is raised
somewhere to commemorate all those who had given their lives for
the independence of India in the last hundred years or more. It would
have some simple inscription, with no mention of the Mutiny or of
individual names’. The UK High Commission also raised the thorny
question of British memorials:
I told him that some plaques and memorials in churches which had been
erected after the Mutiny were couched in language which may have
seemed appropriate one hundred years ago, but which might now be
offensive to Indian nationalist sentiment. Some of these plaques had
actually been removed, but it was impossible to arrange for the removal of
all of them since the matter was in the hands of individual church authorities and congregations, who might object. We were afraid that ardent celebrators of the Mutiny might feel moved to enter churches and cemeteries and smash such plaques. Could his Committee give some direction to local authorities to ensure that no such disturbances occurred? Dr Radhakrishnan said that he thought such misconduct extremely unlikely, but agreed that his Committee might issue some sort of direction on the matter.6

In May 1957, it was reported from India in the fortnightly summary, that ‘the Communists and the Praja Socialist Party have called for the removal of all British statues erected after 1857. At Benares a marble statue of Queen Victoria was slightly damaged in a scuffle between demonstrators and police; it was promptly repaired by the local authorities.’ Fortunately, the summary concluded, public interest had been but ‘slight’ and the celebrations passed off quietly.7 Eventually, at Cawnpore ‘after the leaders of the British community had told the Collector, quite informally, that the proposed position of the monument was not only offensive to our feelings but also contrary to the terms of the deed of gift by which the memorial gardens, in which the well is situated, had been handed over to the local authorities in 1949’, the plinth for the new statue was removed, to be re-erected in another part of the gardens on unconsecrated ground.8

Whilst controversy raged in north India, in Britain questions were being asked as to whether the British government was intending to recognise the centenary, and whether services were to be held at appropriate sites in India. The Commonwealth Relations Office [CRO] responded in June 1957 with the explanation that no national official ceremonies were contemplated: ‘there are strong arguments in the interests of British residents and others now in India for not taking action on an official basis which would revive old feelings of bitterness’.9

In August 1957, with political speeches like that of President Rajendra Prasad using the centenary as an opportunity to reflect on British rule, the UK press detected a growth in anti-British sentiment with corresponding threats to British statuary in India: ‘the ubiquitous statues of the Queen Empress, which survived unscathed the turmoils of 1947, are now in many places found “offensive to the national sentiment”’. 10 Summing up the fate of British memorials in India in the wake of the mutiny centenary commemorations, the UK High Commission in Delhi made the following appraisal:

the Government of Uttar Pradesh… announced on 27th June that all statues “reminiscent of foreign domination” were to be removed by 15th August.
These of course included the several royal statues in Lucknow, Cawnpore, Allahabad, Agra and elsewhere, and all have now gone. Madhya Pradesh has followed suit, though I do not think that a clean sweep has yet been made there. Both those States cover areas where there was fighting in 1857. In the Punjab statues are to be removed ‘gradually’, and I have not heard that any have actually gone. The West Bengal authorities, apparently not to be outdone in patriotism, suddenly and shortly before the August celebrations, removed the statue of Sir James Outram in Calcutta, but the large number of other statues there of Kings, Queens, Viceroyys and Generals remain untouched. In Madras the statue of Lord Willingdon was removed but a man who attempted to blow up that of Sir Thomas Munro was promptly sentenced to a year’s rigorous imprisonment. 11

2. 1957 As a Test for Modern Pakistani and Indian Attitudes to British Rule

The 100th anniversary of 1857 came just a year after Britain’s ignoble and abortive invasion of the Suez canal in Egypt, in alliance with Israel and the French, which had brought so much international criticism. Britain still held many colonies in Africa and South-East Asia, and at least in two of these, Kenya and Malaya, there were major ongoing insurgencies. The British government was thus highly sensitive at this time to any further damage that might be done to Britain’s reputation and record as an imperial power. There was thus considerable correspondence regarding the likely attitude and approach of politicians to the anniversary within the subcontinent. In Karachi, the High Commissioner, Charles Thompson, was apprehensive that ‘the celebrations here will be used not only for every conceivable kind of misrepresentation of the United Kingdom’s part in the Mutiny, but also for the purposes of domestic politics’ – the Muslim League was at that time seeking to make a comeback, having been recently ousted from government. 12 His reaction was to suggest two possible courses of action: ‘ignore the event, or to do all that we can to see that the United Kingdom is not too grossly misrepresented’. For the second course of action, he recommended, amongst a number of options:

\{a\} A high level approach to the Pakistanis designed to impress upon them the risk of damage to good relations and to stimulate them to take official action to keep the celebrations within reasonable channels.
\{b\} A major publicity campaign designed to attract attention towards the co-operation between the two countries, particularly since 1947.
\{c\} Measures [both here and elsewhere] to counteract the inevitable leap on to the anti-imperialist band-wagon of Soviet and satellite propagandists.

The Karachi High Commissioner's own personal opinion was to favour the second option over a policy of detachment.
The High Commission in Delhi was quick to respond, opining a few days later that ‘any kind of large-scale counter-offensive such as Thompson suggests for Pakistan would in India be a major error…. Our main object during the whole affair will be, by whatever means, to damp down the fires of controversy rather than to stoke them up.’ The CRO agreed that a policy of ‘detachment’ was preferable and advised the UK High Commission in Karachi that ‘our policy is to ensure that any celebrations and publicity here are played down and kept to a minimum’ thereby ruling out any of the measures suggested by Thompson to counteract local propaganda.

During initial commemorations, in May 1957, the British praised the restraint of central government and most of the press in India. However, in August, President Rajendra Prasad’s broadcast speech about the centenary was felt, by the High Commission in Delhi to be consistently anti-British without a single friendly word for the good things done by the British in India or for the spirit of partnership in which the British had agreed to Indian independence ten years ago. This was contrary to what I had understood to be the decision of the Indian authorities, that the celebrations of the centenary of 1857 and the tenth anniversary of 1947 should be combined with a view to the emphasis being placed more on the friendship between India and Britain expressed by the great event of a decade ago than on the hostility between them engendered by the events of a century ago.

Consequently, summing up the centenary events in India, the UK High Commission commented, ‘Indians are thoroughly preoccupied by the problems which independence has brought them, and in their disappointment that the millennium has not yet been achieved many are still inclined to find the foreigner, and particularly the British, a useful scape-goat – a habit that became deeply ingrained before 1947.’ A notable exception, he noted, was the attitude of the Governor of Bombay, Sri Prakasa, a veteran Congressman. Opening a meeting of his local Committee on 23rd July Sri Prakasa said that the Centenary celebrations should not be used to arouse anti-British feelings, deprecated the destruction of statues or portraits of British leaders in India, and suggested that people like Robert Clive should be regarded as common heroes to both British and Indians.

3. India – Politicians and the Mutiny Centenary

The British documents throw interesting light on the reported attitudes and concerns of the post-independence central government in India and on reactions both by local and opposition politicians to the forthcoming mutiny commemoration. According to Malcolm Macdonald, UK High Commissioner in Delhi, plans for the centenary
were discussed from July 1955, when the Congress Working Committee asked the Government to give a lead. However, in reply to a question asked in the Lower House in September of that year the Government spokesman said that no decisions had been made. It was not until November 1956 that a central Government Committee was set up under Dr Radhakrishnan, the Vice President, and even after that ‘the local Congress Committees continued to make the running’. In Uttar Pradesh it was announced in May 1956, that a considerable sum had been allotted for the erection of memorials at Lucknow, Meerut, Benares, Jhansi, Cawnpore, Bithur [the site of the Nana Sahib’s palace] and Allahabad. Reference to the centenary was also made in the appeal for funds for the 1957 annual session of Congress, and the usual camp erected for delegates was named after the Rani of Jhansi.

When Malcolm Macdonald himself sounded out Dr Katju, defence minister, about plans for the 1857 commemoration, in mid 1956, he came away convinced that ‘the firebrands will not have things all their own way.’ The reason for approaching Katju was his appointment in charge of a sub-committee of the All-India Congress Committee (AICC), which had been designated to oversee any activities connected with the centenary. The UK High Commission felt confident that ‘when the Government wake up to the potentialities for mischief which the occasion affords they will exert themselves to direct the celebrations into orderly and moderately inoffensive channels.’ It was also noted (perhaps naively) that Morarji Desai, described as ‘soon to become a powerful influence at the Centre’ had, in conversation with a British official in August 1956, ‘expressed strong disapproval of the idea of commemorating the Mutiny at all.’

In January 1957, The UK High Commission in India was reporting a conversation with Vice President Dr Radhakrishnan, chair of the Indian government committee dealing with Mutiny Centenary celebrations to the effect that it had been decided to hold official celebrations not in May [centenary of the outbreak of the Mutiny] but August, when more emphasis would be laid on the 10th year of independence (a similar strategy to that followed by the GOI in 2007). Radhakrishnan had emphasised that the occasion should be one for mutual friendliness between the British and the Indians, not the reverse. It was expected that there would be some celebrations in May, particularly in Uttar Pradesh, but it was considered probable that the State Governments would follow Central Government’s lead and that any celebrations in May would be unofficial. In a follow up note about the meeting the UK High Commission explained ‘The central committee had been deliberately packed with old ICS officers like
Velledi with a view to any anti-British sentiments being reduced as far as possible, if not wholly eliminated.’ It was therefore, chiefly opposition politicians who sought to draw attention to the centenary to highlight anti-imperialist concerns. On May 2, the politburo of the Indian Communist Party called on its members to celebrate May 10 as the anniversary of the ‘First Indian Revolt against the British’, issuing a statement which drew attention to the British attempt to reclassify 1857 as a ‘sepoy mutiny’, and noting parallels with other contemporaneous independence struggles:

Just as today the freedom struggles of the Malayan and African peoples are dubbed banditry and terrorism, British ruling classes and their historians tried to dismiss this great revolt as the ‘Sepoy Mutiny’ – not because they themselves believed it was just a mutiny but because they hoped this deliberate distortion would enable them to prevent the Indian people from following the goal set by the heroes of 1857.²⁰

The Communists planned a 2-day celebration, on May 10th the Meerut event would be commemorated, and on May 11th the proclamation of Bahadur Shah as leader of the rebel forces who had reached Delhi would be marked with mass processions and meetings. Their plans included also the erection of a column in Old Delhi's Chandni Chowk [silver market] where the rebels were subsequently hanged after the British re-occupied Delhi.²¹

The Socialist Party in Uttar Pradesh announced on May 2nd that they would launch a civil disobedience movement throughout the state on May 10. The Socialist leader, Mr Bipinlal Das, said in Lucknow that more than 5,000 ‘civil resisters’ had been enrolled to perform satyagraha [passive resistance] because of the ‘total indifference of the government towards the mounting miseries of the people’. He added that the party’s demands included abolition of land revenue on uneconomic holdings, removal of increased irrigation rates and free education for all up to Junior High School standard. The commemoration was rapidly becoming an opportunity for the opposition to voice numerous grievances.

A Reuters news report noted that these plans contrasted with those of Congress and the Indian Government to commemorate the Indian Mutiny on August 15, the 10th anniversary of India’s independence. Perhaps in order to wrong-foot the opposition, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, subsequently opted to address a mass meeting in Delhi on May 10, and to issue Sen’s book on the revolt on the same day. The central government ultimately decided upon a three-day celebration to mark the centenary, ending with Nehru’s speech at the Ramlila grounds. Demonstrations were banned around
the Parliament buildings, but military and police parades were scheduled to be held at Meerut, 2000 prisoners were amnestied at Lucknow, and further programmes of events arranged at Kanpur and Calcutta.\textsuperscript{22} It was noted by the High Commission in India that several Congress speakers, including Nehru ‘referred particularly to the alleged absence of communal feelings among the mutineers and contrasted this with the modern tendency of Indians to get swept away by “considerations of caste, religion, province and language”.’\textsuperscript{23} The stage was being set therefore for a revised nationalist interpretation of the events that suited the needs of the Indian audience of the 1950s.

In discussing the commemoration events in India, Malcolm Macdonald, the UK High Commissioner in Delhi, noted that ‘The preparations were somewhat belated and lead me to think that the Government were for some time in doubt as to how the occasion should be treated.’ In reply to a parliamentary question asking the Government to arrange for the return from Burma of the remains of Bahadur Shah II, the last of the Moguls, Mr Nehru replied that the Government had not considered this; it was a most complicated matter. There was some speculation as to which ‘heroes’ ought to be commemorated, and, as research continued, the High Commissioner guessed that the Indian Government was ‘discovering how divided India had been one hundred years ago and how many Indians had supported the British’.

The actual celebrations in India during May included speeches, prisoner releases and the presentation of gifts – for example the Governor of UP made a presentation to a nephew of Tantia Tope and a grandson of the Rani of Jhansi. The Socialists under Dr Lohia organised attacks on British statues on 10\textsuperscript{th} May and at Benares a statue of Queen Victoria was damaged by a Socialist demonstrator. At Gorakhpur, the Hindu nationalist Jan Sangh covered Queen Victoria’s statue with a black cloth, and exhibited in front of it a portrait of the Rani of Jhansi. In Bihar there were celebrations at which the Governor spoke in honour of the Rajput Bihari hero Kunwar Singh, while at Delhi the local Congress Committee organised a meeting which was addressed by the Prime Minister. The Communists and the Praja Socialists both organised meetings, the latter in particular demanding the removal of British statues, especially those of the Generals John Nicholson and Sir Alexander Taylor, the captors of Delhi in September 1857. As a result, the Indian Government decided to remove the statues of Taylor and Nicholson, and Nehru reportedly staved off further vandalism with his argument that the memorials had now become part of India’s history.\textsuperscript{24}
Writing in June 1957, Macdonald tentatively concluded that the celebrations ‘have revealed on the whole amongst educated Indians a welcome maturity of judgment on the days of British rule. The Mutiny generated much hatred. It is satisfactory that so little seems to remain’. However, in mid August, the High Commissioner was less impressed with the tone of speech delivered by President Raja Prajad, which he considered to be against the spirit of the Indian Government’s avowed policy to ‘play down the emotional appeal about 1857 in the interests of orderly and friendly demonstrations.’ He spoke to Pillai about it, who agreed to report the views of the High Commission to Nehru ‘so that he might bear them in mind during the speeches which he is to make in the next two days.’

Summing up India’s commemoration of the centenary, the UK High Commission described proceedings there as uniformly dull …. A notable exception to this indifference was the attitude of the Governor of Bombay, Sri Prakasa, a veteran Congressman. Opening a meeting of his local Committee on 23rd July Sri Prakasa said that the Centenary celebrations should not be used to arouse anti-British feelings, deprecated the destruction of statues or portraits of British leaders in India, and suggested that people like Robert Clive should be regarded as common heroes to both British and Indians.

In Bihar the 3-day programme of events included a symposium at Patna University on the National Movement in 1857 in Bihar, a special exhibition at the Patna Museum, a football match, poetry readings at Jagdishpur [the home of the local Mutiny hero, Kunwar Singh] and the presentation of a sports trophy to be named after Kunwar Singh. In West Bengal the programme was spread over 24 days, but evoked very little public interest with little effort made by the Left-Wing parties to turn the occasion to political account. Two 1857 exhibitions were held in Delhi, and two commemorative postage stamps were issued, one showing the Rani of Jhansi. Various memorials including a pillar at Lucknow and another at Meerut were erected.

4. Pakistan – Government Commemoration Plans

In Pakistan, news reports towards the close of 1856 looked to the Pakistan Historical Society to commemorate the centenary fittingly, suggesting that the government was doing little:

While the country’s political organisations have had no thought of it, the nation is beholden to an academic body, the Pakistan Historical Society, which has taken the initiative and given the lead in its plan to observe the
centenary of the 1857 War of Independence in a befitting manner next year. …

Early in the new year, the UK High Commission in Karachi forwarded further press reports, suggesting that the Pakistan Government was finalising its programme for the observance of the centenary which was expected to include ‘special publications commemorating the centenary’. By mid February, the UK High Commission in Karachi reported news reports of week long celebrations in the planning at central and provincial government level. One of the proposals was for the erection of a public assembly hall in Karachi, and it was confirmed by an independent MP from East Pakistan, Fazlur Rahman, that the Pakistan Historical Society at a Dacca conference, during which, it was reported, ‘Fazlur Rahman made a number of highly tendentious references to the ‘barbarous retaliation’ of the foreign rulers.’

Interestingly, a commemorative event held in Burma in 1957 was used to promote Indian-Pakistani cordiality. According to the British embassy in Rangoon, a week of celebrations was held there from 10-17 February 1957, connected to the tomb of Bahadur Shah. The Pakistani and Indian Ambassadors were both present, and the UK representative noted that the latter, Bombay businessman Lalji Mehrotra, made remarks derogatory to the British, while the ‘master of ceremonies’ was ‘a former employee of the Pakistan Embassy, who was one of the main instigators of the Suez riots last November when this Embassy was damaged by demonstrators’. 30

In March the Commonwealth Relations Office asked the UK High Commission in Pakistan to determine ‘the plans of the Central and Provincial Governments. Is there any intention of setting up a high level committee of the kind that has been set up in India under the Vice President?’ In the event, however, it seems that Pakistan’s government took the lead from India, which had switched emphasis to pay rather more attention to August independence celebrations, and began to ‘soft pedal’ on their own plans to celebrate the Mutiny/Uprising. According to the UK High Commission in Karachi, large scale military parades at one time planned were cancelled, ‘much to the relief of the Army. Neither the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Commonwealth Relations nor the Defence Ministry concealed from us their distaste of the whole business’. A public holiday was nonetheless declared in Pakistan on 10th May 1957, and a nationwide programme of public meetings and processions went ahead, involving speeches by national leaders including a short
broadcast message by the Prime Minister, the sale of flags, the issue of special commemorative postage stamps, and the ceremonial laying of the foundation stone of a 65 ft obelisk in Karachi to commemorate the ‘Muslim heroes’. The UK High Commission paid particular attention to a speech by Miss Jinnah, described as ‘the star-turn of the Peshawar celebrations’, who took as her theme ‘the price of freedom is eternal vigilance’ and attributed the failure of the revolt to treachery and weakness at the top, holding this up as an ever present danger. A number of speakers, noted the UK High Commission, sought to link the centenary to the need for the liberation of Kashmir. Mian Iftikharuddin, described as ‘the well-known fellow-travelling member of the National Assembly’ was said to have adopted a ‘different, though not untypical line’ stating that the new danger was American aid, and allegiance of Pakistan to western powers.\(^{32}\)

5. The Historiography and Pedagogy of 1957

In December 1955, the dissolution of the Editorial Board of the History of the Freedom Movement, set up by the Government three years before, drew attention to ongoing quarrels, notably between the historian Dr R C Majumdar, and Surendra Mohan Ghosh MP, Secretary of the Board, over the interpretation of the events of 1857. In January 1955, the Government had decided to sponsor a new history of the Mutiny and had entrusted this task to Dr Surendranath Sen.\(^{33}\) In Karachi, meantime, the UK High Commission opined that ‘the centenary provides an opportunity for an historical text-books Conference aimed at securing agreement on the account of the Mutiny to appear in English, Indian and Pakistani text books’.\(^{34}\) The office in Delhi was less optimistic: ‘As to text books, it would no doubt be a very good thing if an agreed account of the events of 1857 could be arrived at; but I think the chances of agreement are remote. It is not the historical facts but the interpretation of them which is in dispute, and on that both sides are entrenched.’\(^{35}\) The Commonwealth Relations Office [CRO] in London quickly squashed the idea of a text book conference, commenting ‘we feel that this is a non-starter, at least for the UK High Commission or the British Council’, the reason given being that ‘UNESCO is in the throes of organising an exchange of history text books between India/Pakistan and the UK’.\(^{36}\)

Sir William Haley, a former director general of the British Broadcasting Corporation and editor of The Times of London from 1952-66, evidently intended to take new historiography into account when considering the paper’s coverage of the centenary. He stated, ‘one of the most interesting things will be the official Indian history,
which you may remember the Government put in hand three years ago with a definite instruction that it must be ready before the centenary date. British officials were not overly concerned about the ‘official history’ given their positive appraisal of Surendranath Sen. The India Office librarian reported to CRO officials that Sen had spent ‘a good deal of time in the Library where I made available for him all our manuscript and archive material bearing on the Mutiny’ during the summer of 1956, and was considered ‘a good scholar, perhaps India’s best modern historian’. The librarian, Stanley Sutton, believed that Sen’s book, then being printed, would be ‘a dispassionate account which, though doubtless differing in point of view from that of the standard British accounts [all of them, incidentally, much out-of-date] will be neither tendentious nor crudely anti-British.’ From the British point of view, he noted that while there was no British ‘official’ history in preparation several British scholars were due to publish books on the subject, while a number of newspapers were arranging to have special articles commissioned.

The India Office librarian's perspective on Sen’s work was interpreted by Gilbert Laithwaite of the CRO as ‘much more encouraging as regards the probable tone and content of the Government of India’s History than at one time one had feared might be the case”, and details were sent to Haley of The Times, who declared himself ‘very much relieved indeed with the implication that Dr Sen’s history is likely to be reasonably scholarly and dispassionate’. This opinion was confirmed by the Vice President of India Dr Radhakrishnan in a January 1957 meeting with the UK High Commissioner. “He stated that at a recent meeting of the Mutiny Centenary committee he had urged that the volume should contain ‘not patriotic history but scientific history”. He added that he told the Committee that he had studied many documents about the Mutiny, and that both sides had seemed to indulge in a good deal of butchery.’

Surendranath Sen’s book was duly launched as part of the Centenary commemoration by the Central Government at Delhi in May 1957, in the presence of the President, Rajendra Prasad. In a foreword to the book, the Indian Minister of Education, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, noted in the light of available evidence we are forced to the conclusion that the uprising of 1857 was not the result of careful planning, nor were there any ‘master-minds’ behind it. What happened was that in the course of a hundred years the Indian people developed a distaste for the Company’s rule. Indians did not for a long time realise that power been captured by a foreign race and that they were reduced to the position of slaves in their
own country. Once this realisation became widespread, conditions were created for an outburst. This when it took place was due not to a conspiracy by a few individuals or a group but to the growing discontent of large numbers of people.

Commenting on earlier works written by some Indians on the struggle, Azad added ‘if the truth be told, we have to admit that the books they have written are not history but mere political propaganda’. However, a Reuters news report on the commemoration remarked that the question of whether the 1857 uprising should properly be characterised as a ‘mutiny’ or ‘war of independence’ ‘still leaves Indian historians sharply divided’.

The works of Sen (Eighteen Fifty-Seven) and Majumdar (The Sepoy Mutiny and the Revolt of 1857) which both appeared in 1957 received plaudits in the British press. Writing in The Times of 31st May 1957, Professor Cyril Philips, later to become Sir Cyril Philips (director of London University’s School of Oriental and African Studies 1957-76) wrote as follows:

Though independently written, these two studies display a remarkable similarity of outlook. Rejecting from the start the view that the mutiny had a national character or was in any serious sense a war of independence, they describe it as originating in sepoy discontents and deriving its strength from disaffection among some groups of the civil population... Save for the Rani of Jhansi .... the mutiny leadership is mercilessly stripped of all romance. Bahadur Shah is revealed as corresponding with the British in order to betray Delhi ... and Nana Sahib is dismissed as wholly contemptible... Both writers are just as much concerned to describe the excesses of the mutineers as of the troops under British command. ... In only one respect do their interpretations show a significant difference. Professor Sen is disposed to minimize, Professor Majumdar to exaggerate, the communal tensions which emerged with the struggle for power between the mutineers, but in any event this communal factor was not strong enough to determine the main course of the mutiny.

Malcolm Macdonald, of the UK High Commission in Delhi, for his part, considered Majumdar and Sen’s books as ‘admirably objective works, indeed remarkable considering the short time in which they have been written. Both reject the theory of a general conspiracy, condemning as obvious forgeries two documents, recently ‘discovered’ with some publicity, purporting to prove such a conspiracy. Both deny that any moral issues were involved.’ The chief difference was that Sen was prepared to concede, with many qualifications, that ‘what began as a fight for religion ended as a war of independence’. Macdonald, regretted, however:
one tenaciously held Indian view which seems likely to gain yet further strength from these centenary celebrations. Maulana Azad, the Minister of Education, in a foreword to Dr Sen’s work, writes: “one may safely conclude that before the days of British rule there was no such thing as the Hindu-Muslim problem in India”. It is notable that a reviewer of the book took him up on this point but others, including the Prime Minister, have echoed it, referring emphatically to our alleged policy of ‘divide and rule’.43

Macdonald further appreciatively noted ‘how little mark was made by the old revolutionary, V.D. Savarkar, who wound up the unofficial centenary celebrations in Delhi’. In 1908, his book The Indian War of Independence, 1857, which was the first full-scale attempt to interpret the Mutiny as an organised national struggle for liberation, had been considered so dangerous that it was proscribed by the Government of British India before it was even published, and it was not in fact allowed into the country until 1946. Macdonald, in 1957, felt able to write with some satisfaction that ‘its arguments have been confounded by Indian historians themselves, and the old man’s reiteration of them was almost an act of defiance.’

In Pakistan, the activities of the Pakistan Historical Society were eagerly reported upon by the Karachi Evening Star, which considered that its plans to commemorate the centenary showed up the neglect of the occasion by politicians and would rewrite the skewed and communalist portrayal of 1857 heroes peddled in India:

Today in communal Bharat, comparatively minor Hindu figures are being raised sky high and the dust of oblivion is being systematically thrown on the real pioneers and leaders just because they were Muslims. It is now the task of the Pakistan Historical Society to remove the thick crust of forgetfulness so that the Millat could pay a worthy homage to these early architects and builders of our freedom structure. It is at the same time no less essential that we memorize and act upon the noble lessons furnished by their glorious sacrifices.44

6. Press reports on the Centenary in India, Pakistan and Britain

Action was taken early in Britain to seek to influence press reporting about the 1857 commemoration. Lord Hailey of the Royal Institute of International Affairs at Chatham House, contacted WJ Haley of The Times in late 1956 to discuss the preferred ‘line’ to be taken, and was reassured in response: ‘we shall certainly do something about the Mutiny and will no doubt make clear its nature.’45 Among the ‘lines’ to be taken was the ‘desirability of using in any public statements that there might be the term 'Sepoy Mutiny’ rather than ‘Indian Mutiny’.”46 Cuttings from press reports in the
subcontinent were sent to The Times, which were interpreted by the latter as ‘showing that they are clearly going to play the thing up as the beginning of the ‘War of Independence’.’ Haley commented ‘being as tactful and as reasonable as we can, we can hardly be expected in Britain to see these events through Indian eyes.’

An article in the Karachi Evening Star on 18 December 1956 managed to cast the mutiny both as a British imperialist vendetta and as a betrayal of the Muslims by a nouveau riche Hindu class:

This type of ‘mutiny’, as the successors of the East India Company adventurers used to call it, ended in a colonial vendetta so far unheard of it Indian history. Nobles and princes were turned paupers and tramps; whole habitations in centres of revolt were literally ploughed down and the grievous wounds inflicted especially in the Doab, far from healing in the course of nine decades, were only freshly opened in the 1947 holocaust of an equal magnitude. The only beneficiaries among the Muslims were the few mercenaries whose feudal castles were raised on the ashes of valiant martyrs. But the tragedy also proved a blessing in disguise and was perhaps necessary to jolt a self-complacent community out of its affluence-born stupor. And further it furnished the first abiding lesson in the shape of the Great Betrayal by the newly-rich Hindu Babu and Mahajan classes which proved how hazardous and difficult it was for Muslims to collaborate in any joint anti-imperialist movement. The double-cross of the Hindu revivalist mind was self-evident in the fact that in the earlier repressive stage they hurled all the blame for revolt on Muslims, the same Hindu intelligentsia claimed all credit and honour when freedom was at the doorstep in the second and final stage.

The commemoration, for the Evening Star, served as an opportunity for Pakistan to rewrite the history of an event which it claimed, had been usurped for Hindu revivalist purposes.

The Times in January 1957, noted that no ‘national official ceremonies to mark the centenary are at present contemplated’ but remarked that some British regiments intended to hold commemorative parades. Meanwhile at around the same time in Karachi, the Morning News printed a lengthy article headed ‘Muslims helped crush 1857 Revolt: BBC Thinks’ referring to a documentary broadcast that month on UK television.

In May 1957, the British broadsheets published commissioned scholarly articles on the Mutiny – Percival Spear of Cambridge University for The Guardian and Cyril Philips of the School of Oriental and African Studies in The Times - as well as publishing editorials. Spear’s article stressed that this ‘rising of the Bengal Army’ had been badly handled by incompetent higher officers, had been taken advantage of by landlords and minor princelings, but had alienated the new middle class ‘brought to life by the institutions set
up by the British', claiming that they continued to support the British, passively. He drew attention to the fact that the grandfather of Jawaharlal Nehru, who at the outbreak of the Mutiny was a Government official in Delhi, dissociated himself from it and withdrew from the city. In a somewhat Marxist analogy, the function of the mutiny was said to have ‘completed the ruin of the moribund classes and left the way open to the new classes and personalities, which accepted the changed world brought about by the British and did not hope or want to restore its circumstances of the eighteenth century’.  

Professor Philips, writing in The Times, reflected on the long term results of the mutiny:

In British eyes the Mutiny acquired the character of a great national epic in which against a tragic background British heroism triumphed over Indian treachery, an interpretation which contributed to a gradual hardening of British political policy to the point at which a generation later the historian John Seeley could express the view that “it is necessary to govern India as if we were to govern her for ever”. ….. The Mutiny expressed traditional India’s repugnance to the new life which was pressing upon her. If it had succeeded India would have been plunged back into the unending warfare from which she had suffered in the eighteenth century. Its failure meant that Indians would be exposed in still greater degree to ‘the belligerent civilization’ of the west.  

The Guardian editorial contended that the centenary should serve as an opportunity to recollect with horror the ‘English fury’ which swept over North India, and in fact that the mutiny had convinced the British never again to allow tensions to rise to such a pitch: ‘Thus in the years of the combat between the British Raj and the Indian nationalist movement there was a saving circumspection on both sides. Those martyred in 1857 and the following year – on both sides – may have prevented others from being martyred several decades later.’ The editor also praised the restraint of the Indian Government on the occasion of the centenary:

It is a happy thing that India was emancipated ten years before the centenary of the Mutiny. Otherwise the memory of that disaster would have caused new turbulence. The Government of India has been humane and constructive in trying to prevent the commemorations – which are rightly held – from waking old bitterness. It has directed attention to the fact that this year is the centenary not of the Mutiny only but also of the foundation by the British of three Indian universities. These in the decades after the Mutiny were to equip with Western ideas the middle class by which India’s emancipation was eventually to be carried out. The magnanimity of the Indian Congress party in recognising these things ought to be saluted.
In India, meanwhile, press comment ‘upon what is often known here now as ‘the first war of independence’ has also been very restrained’, according to the Fortnightly Summary sent in by British representatives in the subcontinent. The UK High Commission in Karachi, for its part, commented in June 1957 that the Pakistani press ‘gave prominence to romanticised accounts of the part played by the last Mogul Emperor Bahadur Shah and to his banishment and exile in Burma. The killing of his sons and the ruthlessness of the Company’s forces generally were described with no lack of detail.

President Rajendra Prasad’s speech on the centenary of August 1957 was reported by the British press, and The Times took the opportunity to reflect on contemporary changes in Indian attitudes to the British:

Two years ago it was a common experience for an Englishman in India to be complimented spontaneously on this country’s “enlightened act of statesmanship” in 1947. Today he is more likely to see newspaper articles demonstrating that “enlightened Act” as a myth, that independence was wrung only by an unremitting struggle against oppression, and that the present economic difficulties are primarily a legacy of British misrule.

In an overall commentary on press reports emanating from India, the UK High Commission in Delhi noted ‘Perhaps the most enterprising bit of journalism occasioned by the Centenary was an edition of the sensational weekly Blitz devoted to a ‘re-trial’ of Bahadur Shah and the other leaders of the Mutiny, with Sir Winston Churchill in the role of stage villain, as counsel for the prosecution, and Subhas Chandra Bose for the defence. This is in fact an attack both on the historians Dr Sen and Dr Majumdar for writing objectively about the Mutiny and also on the Congress Government for playing down the celebrations against the will of ‘the people’.

7. British Regiments & Communities in India and Neighbouring States

The commemoration of 1857 was a matter of some interest to regimental associations. In December 1956, General Pugh wrote to the War Office regarding projected Gurkha and 60th Regiment events to mark their involvement in the siege of Delhi. This correspondence was passed on to the Foreign Office who did not view the prospect of military commemorations ‘with any enthusiasm’. Nevertheless it was expected that the projected celebration of the regiments at Winchester would simply relate to the ‘distinguished military service rendered by the officers and men concerned’ and would not be likely to attract
much attention in India. When it transpired that a number of British regiments planned to hold commemorative events, it was agreed with the CRO that they be of ‘a modest type, not calculated to give offence to our Dominions’. The CRO nevertheless sent a telegram to the HCs in India and Pakistan, asking whether there was ‘any risk that participation by British Gurkhas in celebrations might affect attitude of Government of India to our arrangements with both India and Nepal for recruiting Gurkhas?’ The UK High Commission in India was concerned that ‘we cannot ignore risk that opposition parties, especially Communists, would use this as effective weapon of attack on British Gurkha recruitment and it would be preferable to avoid this risk altogether if possible’. Accordingly, the CRO informed the War Office in February 1957 that ‘there is a special risk in British Gurkha regiments participating in any celebrations, and I very much hope that it may be possible to follow the High Commissioner’s advice that this should be avoided.’ A handwritten note appended to the typed letter added ‘We are a bit touchy in the Commonwealth these days’. This observation was no doubt due to the fact that many Commonwealth leaders, including Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, had only recently condemned the British air and land invasion of Suez.

In response to the anxieties of the CRO, the War Office pointed out that the British Army commemorated many battles against countries who had since become allies, without any untoward consequences. Accepting that ‘our relations with India may be particularly delicate at the present time’ it was nevertheless felt that the Mutiny was not a war between the British and Indian peoples, and some, at least, of the commemorations will show that the episodes of extreme courage and loyalty were shared by British and Indian soldiers as comrades in arms. If we take this line and avoid any suggestion that there was a national rising it seems to us that there is no need to worry about trying to re-christen the 100 years old child.

Subsequently, the CRO advised the UK High Commission in Delhi that the Army council was ‘warning all Commands that where celebrations are planned the greatest care should be taken to ensure that no offence is given and that the occasion is used to express the mutual friendliness between the British and Indian peoples’ and asked to be advised on any developments in India.

8. Conclusion

Until pushed by the activities of opposition politicians into marking the centenary of the Indian Uprising in May, the Indian government seemed happy to go along with British hopes that events
commemorating 1857 might be merged altogether with the celebrations due to place in August marking the 10th anniversary of Indian independence. Despite the eventual decision by the government of India to mark May 1857 as a distinct anniversary, the central and state governments appear to have nonetheless co-operated enthusiastically in the protection of British monuments. The government of India seems to have shared the anxiety of the British that militant expressions of anti-British and nationalist feeling were not in the interests of the state. This extended to the issue of Emperor Bahadur Shah’s remains, with the government of India firmly discouraging calls for their return to India from their final resting place in Yangon in Burma. Regimental commemorative and Indian ceremonies cautiously emphasised the aspect of heroism on all sides. In the official sponsored history of the Uprising, and in the Indian Prime minister's speeches, rather than anti-imperialism, there was much talk instead of the common cause made by Hindu and Muslim, fighting together for their freedom. With the singular exception of the Jan Sangh, the Communist party, and the Socialist party of India, there appears to have been an unwillingness to engage in overtly patriotic and anti-British activism. National interests therefore took precedence over popular enthusiasm. Perhaps the most overtly critical and perceptive comments on the whole affair were to be found in Karachi newspapers, in which (by contrast with Delhi and London) no official 'line' appears to have been encouraged. The Pakistani government was indeed even quite reckless of diplomatic niceties by permitting an official previously involved in organising violent anti-British demonstrations to take the lead in a public ceremony in memory of Bahadur Shah Zafar in Rangoon. Here Surendranath Sen's hope that Muslim and Hindu and (implicitly) Pakistani and Indian might stand shoulder to shoulder in denouncing the British was fulfilled. It passed though largely unnoticed. It is clear that the greatest hope of the British government was for the stability of the Congress-led Indian government and of Anglo-Indian relations and nothing was published in either the official Indian history of 1857, nor R.C. Mazumdar's parallel volume, that could be said to threaten either or to cause any offence. Above all, the official British line, that 1857 was a 'Sepoy Mutiny' and not an 'Indian Uprising' – despite some dissensions - seemed to achieve widespread acceptance. Importantly, this allowed British reporting of the anniversary to peddle, unchallenged, the view that 1857 served to sweep away corrupt old Indian elites, enabled the Indian middle classes (who were generally 'loyal') to prosper, and ushered in a new era of beneficent, modernising, and considerate British rule, justly tempered to ensure that there was never to be any repetition of such brutal events. For
these achievements, the British were persuaded, the Indian National Congress had cause to be grateful. This was a comfortable delusion that became the normalised interpretation of empire for post-war British generations: one that would allow Indian immigration to the UK to be accommodated with relative ease (or neglect), that allowed the British to continue look down upon their (economically more successful) European neighbours, and would allow future imperialist adventures – whether in Kenya, Aden, the Falklands or Iraq - to be readily justified, despite their vast expense, as limited exercises in well-intentioned paternalism, protecting people from the mis-rule of rapacious elites and ultimately for the better interest of all concerned.

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1 Research for this article was conducted with the aid of a research grant from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council for a project entitled ‘Mutiny at the Margins: the Indian Uprising of 1857’. The project was conducted in the School of History, Classics and Archaeology, University of Edinburgh, between September 2006 and August 2008, to coincide with the 150th anniversary of the uprising. For further details see www.casas.ed.ac.uk/mutiny

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6 Note of UK HC on meeting with Radhakrishnan, Jan 1957.


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11 UK HC Delhi to the Rt Hon Harold Macmillan MP, CRO, 1 October 1957.


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To underline British interpretations of the event, a dramatic documentary was commissioned in Urdu for the BBC World Service, which told the tale of 1857 almost entirely in terms of its elites.